

Tales of the unexpected

Uncovering an illuminating Iron Age settlement at Poulton

Northwest England has traditionally been viewed as a sparsely populated, peripheral landscape during the Iron Age – but excavations in rural Cheshire have revealed an unexpected Iron Age and Romano-British settlement that could revolutionise this picture. **Kevin Cootes, Rea Carlin, Janet Axworthy, Matt Thomas, Roxanne Guildford, and David Jordan** reveal more.

Regular readers of CA may recall a feature exploring the excavation of over 900 skeletons from a rural cemetery associated with a late medieval chapel at Chapel Field in Poulton, Cheshire (see CA 352). The human remains were unusually well-preserved for the region, thanks to an atypically neutral soil pH, allowing the Poulton Project to investigate the lives and deaths of this small farming community in fascinating detail. The results of this research are nationally important, yet within the graves further surprises awaited us. With each skeleton, we recovered artefacts predating the burials. Unbeknown to the medieval grave diggers, they

had been cutting through older archaeological deposits, shovelling evidence of earlier activity back in with the interments.

Hundreds of finds were recovered during the first few seasons of excavation, with the earliest comprising flint and stone tools of Mesolithic date. The small hunter-gatherer groups that they had belonged to were the first people to repopulate northern Britain after the retreat of the ice sheets around 10,000 years ago, and most likely used Chapel

ABOVE A reconstructed roundhouse at Poulton, where excavations have uncovered unexpected evidence of an Iron Age and Romano-British settlement.

ALL PHOTOS: The Poulton Project

Field as a seasonal hunting camp. Further, though possibly sporadic, activity was attested by Neolithic stone tools of the first farmers to enter Britain 6,000 years ago, whilst Bronze Age finds confirmed that the area had continued to be used over the next three millennia.

What surprised us, however, was the large and variable collection of Roman finds, including pottery, roof tiles, brooches, and other items that attested to significant occupation during this period. Our initial analysis revealed material spanning almost the entire Roman occupation of Cheshire, from the late 1st to 4th centuries AD, whilst the presence of significant quantities of Samian Ware (used for fine dining in Roman Britain) hinted that we could be dealing with a site of some status. The discovery of such material was incredibly important, as our site is only five miles south of the legionary

BELOW During the investigation of medieval burials (see CA 352), the project team found earlier artefacts in each grave – here, a piece of mortarium, a heavy Roman cooking vessel used for grinding.

fortress at Chester, the largest such military base in Roman Britain and home for most of its existence to the XX Legion Valera Victrix.

While a great deal is known about the military at Chester from over two centuries of excavation and scholarly research, the rural area around the fortress remains poorly understood. Little is known about how the landscape was organised and used, for example, or how the army interacted with the local population. The Poulton Project's discovery of such a significant assemblage meant that we had accidentally found a new rural Roman settlement: one with the potential to provide answers to these questions.

EXPLORING THE IRON AGE

Encouraged by the discovery of such a large finds assemblage, we surveyed the area around the medieval chapel to search for traces of Roman structures and evidence of how the land had been used during this period. About 100m to the north one of our test trenches did indeed yield structural



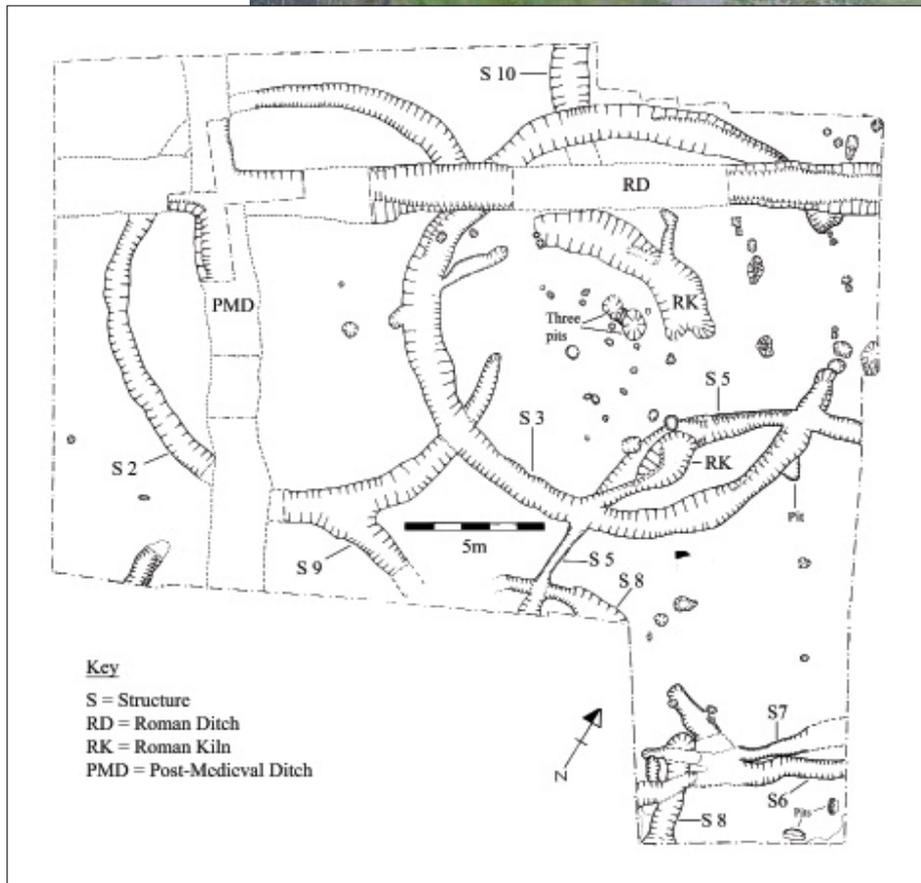
ABOVE The discovery of plentiful Samian ware (this fragment bears the stamp of the workshop of Doeccus), associated with fine dining Roman-style, hinted at a high-status site.



archaeology, but not from a Roman building: we had unexpectedly uncovered the enclosing ditch and several post-holes of an Iron Age roundhouse. This discovery had far reaching ramifications, as lowland settlement during the last eight centuries BC is poorly represented in the north-west of Britain.

When such sites do occur, they are often heavily damaged by later Roman activity and ploughing, while the generally acidic local soils result in a poor level of finds retrieval. Densely settled sites are in fact so rare that late prehistoric researchers have traditionally regarded the entire region as sparsely populated with little or no social stratification, especially when compared with southern England or areas east of the Pennines. Even as

RIGHT This aerial photograph shows the excavation of Iron Age and later features (also illustrated in the plan **BELOW**). The site was home to multiple Iron Age roundhouses, some of whose footprints intercut, suggesting that they had not existed at the same time.



interestingly their footprints often overlapped meaning that they could not have existed at the same time.

This densely packed area represented multiple generations of occupation, demolition, and rebuilding during the first millennium BC. Numerous pits, linear boundaries, a beam slot (which once held a wooden wall), and over 60 post-holes which could not be assigned to a known roundhouse ditch were also discovered in this trench, while the remains of some structures continued past our area of excavation, showing that the settlement continued in all directions. How were we to make sense of such a busy area of habitation? This story was further complicated by the presence of later Roman features which often cut into and partially destroyed the Iron Age evidence. The solution was to come from the roundhouse ditches themselves.

A UNIQUE TIME-CAPSULE

The ditches, which were unusually deep for roundhouses, provided important information for interpretation of the site, as the as the Iron Age inhabitants had used them for the disposal of their rubbish. The neutral soils which had preserved the site's medieval skeletons had the same effect on the delicate Iron Age finds, whilst the depth of the ditches

late as 2005, Professor Barry Cunliffe's extensive publication *Iron Age Communities in Britain* (see 'Further Reading' box on p.xx) contains less than a single page for the entire area west of the Pennines. Many local archaeologists have disputed this theory, pointing to the multiple Iron Age hillforts across the north-west of Britain which would have dominated the landscape at this time. The problem was, there was only limited evidence with which to dispute such a model.

In order to accurately characterise and interpret the nature of the late prehistoric remains, the next step was to expand our test trench so that we could carry out a detailed archaeological investigation with our students and band of dedicated volunteers. Our efforts were certainly rewarded, as we uncovered evidence for at least eight roundhouses, which we labelled as 'Structures'. They were primarily represented by the ditches that once surrounded them, as well as occasional internal post-holes, and



ABOVE These are all fragments from a single Iron Age vessel made of Very Coarse Pottery (VCP), a ceramic type associated with the production and transportation of salt.

had guarded them from destruction by historic ploughing. These factors combined to provide a stable environment for bone, pottery, and metal, preserving the most complete time-capsule of Iron Age life ever to be recovered in lowland North-West Britain.

Our investigations in the ditches also revealed charcoal-rich domestic backfill: the remains of fuel waste from cooking, intermixed with thousands of heat-affected stones that had been used to boil water. Crucially, radiocarbon dating of the charcoal allowed us to establish a settlement chronology, showing that the majority of the structures spanned the middle-to-late Iron Age, from the 4th to late 1st centuries BC. Structure 10, however, provided a date of 731–398 cal bc,

extending evidence for settlement back into the Early Iron Age. Meanwhile, analysis of the charred plants and seeds within this material shed interesting light on the Iron Age population's diet and environment. It appears that the area around Chapel Field was partially wooded, dominated by ash, oak, and Maloideae species (apple subfamily), with occasional birch, cherry species, hazel, and alder. The Iron Age community had collected stem and branch wood from the woodland floor for fuel, evidenced by insect degradation, and we were also able to tell that they had cultivated spelt wheat and barley, and possibly collected wild oats, as well as gathering hazelnuts.

Aside from charcoal and heat-affected stones, more than 5,000

finds were recovered from the ditches, painting a vivid picture of everyday life at this time. Most abundant was pottery used for the production and transportation of salt (Very Coarse Pottery or VCP), providing our first indication that the Iron Age inhabitants had held some degree of social status. In Cheshire, salt was manufactured in the Middlewich/Nantwich area and had been transported 30–40 miles to Poulton in hand-made ceramic vessels. These were then smashed to retrieve the salt, which was a valuable commodity in Iron Age Britain as it was the only food preservative that was reliable all year round. Over 10kg of this pottery has so far been recovered during our investigation; the largest amount for a non-production site in the north-west and one of the largest in the country.

The site's population was also engaged in iron- and copper-working; we have found moulds for dress pins, metalworking waste, and even a large glacial granite boulder that had been used as an anvil. The recovery of a ceramic block with a hole poked through was even more astounding,

BELOW This ceramic block has a hole poked through it; it helped with the circulation of air during Iron Age copper-working, and represents a very rare find in Britain.





LEFT Backfill within the roundhouse ditches yielded plentiful animal bones, offering insights into the community's diet.

though, as its purpose was to allow air to be pumped to raise the temperature during copper-working. These items are known as 'block tuyères', and are rare in Iron Age Britain, being far more common in France. The presence of this example is all the more interesting as it was formed with clay consistent with local sources, indicating that the technology was widely available.

Other items hinted at trans-regional trade such as an imported jet/shale finger ring. Other finds included a copper-alloy dress pin, a ceramic spinning weight, stone

tools for grinding pigments to make dye, and a stone mould for casting dress accessories. The recovery of over 1,000 animal bones, moreover, comprised the first collection of its type in the region, combining with the palaeoenvironmental evidence to confirm that a mixed farming economy was practised by the people of this settlement. This collection was dominated by domesticated animals, namely cattle, sheep, and pigs, and their ages of slaughter enabled us to further infer what each type of animal was used for, whether it be dairying,

traction, or as a primary provider of meat. Other animals that formed a minor component of the assemblage included wild cat, domestic dog (we also found its faeces in the form of coprolites), horse, red and roe deer, and hare.

The Iron Age inhabitants of Poulton were evidently using every resource available to them. This is particularly clear in their treatment of red and roe deer antlers, which were collected off the ground after they had been naturally shed. Using a recognised Iron Age method where they would 'saw and snap' the tines, they were then fashioned into a variety of items, including cheek pieces for horses, knife handles, and awls for making holes in wood and leather. Two objects stand out in particular. One is a near-complete red deer antler with grooves sawn into it for some reason that we have yet to discern; the other is a near-complete 'toggle' of the same material, which was decorated with circular and semi-circular marks. This latter artefact type is regularly found on high-status Iron Age sites in southern Britain, such as Danebury hillfort, and



BELOW Antler-working seems to have been a common industry on the site. These red deer antlers show multiple incisions and signs of the 'saw and snap' method.

combines with other items such as the tuyère to challenge existing models of the north-west being a lowly, sparsely populated region.

WE HAVE RITUAL!

The presence of multiple structures and a large and varied material assemblage is highly significant for the north-west, but as our excavations progressed, we also began to discover evidence for ritual acts. Whilst Poulton is notable for its medieval skeletons, we also have human remains from the Iron Age, albeit it in a very different manner. As we excavated the ditch backfill and post-holes, we began to recover fragments of skull and an unfused humerus bone from an individual who had not reached adulthood. These remains represent four or five people, and are mainly consistent with known Iron Age practices across the country – with one exception, where we recovered three tiny unfused human vertebrae interred immediately outside a roundhouse. This may represent all that remained of the burial of a newborn baby.

Within Structure 3, we encountered something very special. This building was different from the others, containing an impressive entrance which required stone filled pits to support the door posts. A fence further shielded the entrance and interior from the elements and controlled visibility from the outside. Over 50% of the entire assemblage was recovered from the enclosing ditch of this one structure, including many of the rarer and traded items, with a distinct clustering around the entrance. Within the ditch fill we also recovered the partial burial of a dog, next to a corroded but complete and carefully placed iron adze, an item used for

hafting and working wood. A second and near identical dog burial was found in a small pit in the centre of the structure. Both the adze and the dogs would have been highly valued in prehistoric society for woodworking and as guards/hunters. Their removal from everyday life can be interpreted as a significant sacrifice and ritual act. Might this structure have been the house of an important person; maybe a tribal chief?

CONTINUITY OR CHANGE?

The Iron Age remains from Poulton indicate an established, prosperous population of some status, but our discoveries have raised as many questions as they have answered. We have yet to establish whether the settlement was enclosed, how large it was, or if the focus for structures shifted over time. Limited resistivity

survey has, however, indicated that the settlement extends at least 100m to the west, 80m to the south and an unknown distance to the east and north. One of the biggest questions we seek to answer though, is what happened to this community when the Roman army arrived in the second half of the first century AD? We certainly have an abundance of material culture, but there is a gap of almost a century between our roundhouses and the first Roman finds. This isn't unexpected, as the boundary between the Iron Age and Roman period in Britain is notoriously difficult to see archaeologically. This is especially true for north-west England, where it is virtually absent. Recent discoveries and post-excavation research may be about to provide answers – but first, to the evidence for Roman occupation itself.

Interpretation of the Roman finds suffers from the same problems as the Iron Age. We have yet to establish the full extent of the landscape or interpret what kind of settlement this was.



ABOVE More evidence of Iron Age antlerworking: a polished, perforated antler tine, and one of the project's star finds, a near-complete decorated 'toggle'.

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We have established that small-scale industrial activities were taking place, as the Iron Age remains are truncated by two kilns and a substantial linear ditch. Our geophysical survey and investigations approximately ten metres south of the Iron Age structures revealed that the ditch was part of a large enclosure in the shape of a capital 'D'. Meanwhile, excavations of the southern portion (in Trench 48) produced a wealth of Roman material culture and evidence for recuts. The earliest fills, however, contained only animal bone and Iron Age pottery, indicating a late prehistoric origin. Charcoal samples obtained from the primary fill will provide the answers, but we await the end of the lockdown and reopening of the radiocarbon dating lab to find out the date once and for all.

Returning to where our story started on the Chapel trench, continued excavation revealed the reason we were finding redeposited material predating medieval activity. Beneath the burials in the northern graveyard we discovered deep curving ditches. These

BELOW Excavating the Roman 'D' shaped enclosure.



LEFT & BELOW Some of the dumped material from the Roman ditches: a cattle jaw bone, and dumped building material hinting at Roman-style architecture.

features had probably once enclosed a structure during the Roman period, which was later replaced on the same location by the chapel. Further investigations revealed rubbish pits, fragments of gully, and even a small oven. Whoever lived in this building had used the ditches for the disposal of their rubbish, just as the Iron Age population had done outside their roundhouses, and analysis of this material enabled us to make tentative interpretations regarding the building and those who occupied it.

The pottery spanned the entire Roman occupation of the site, indicating that this structure had a



long life. Large quantities of kitchen and Samian Ware further indicated domestic cooking and dining, and one mortarium (a bowl for mixing food) dating to the early second century AD had the letters 'LVCV' scratched onto the outside. This is possibly a clue to the name of its owner, and indicates that literate Romanised people lived at Poulton. From surviving pieces of sandstone blocks and ceramic roof tile, it seems that this structure had a solid foundation and classic Roman roof, while the recovery of part of a stone arch, plastered and painted red, provides further evidence that this was a building of high status. It is with the animal bone, however, that we glean our clearest insight into the identity of the population during the Roman Period.

Analysis of the assemblage revealed Romanised eating habits, indicated by the presence of species such as oyster, domestic fowl, partridge, possibly bantam, and duck and/or mallard. The majority of the animal bones, however, did not reflect expectations for a Romano-British settlement.



LEFT Might the site's proximity to a fertile floodplain have motivated Poulton's Iron Age inhabitants to settle here?

lies at the southern edge of Chapel Field, where the land forms a plateau which abruptly drops over 10m to the floodplain of the Old Pulford Brook and River Dee. The soils of Chapel Field overlie the boulder clay which characterises and dominates Cheshire. Such soils are good for growing grasses for fodder, but until post-medieval drainage and land improvement, were not suited to cultivating crops. The floodplain below, however, is a different story. The annual floods would have deposited nutrient-rich silts which would have made ideal fertilisers for summer crop growth. This would have enabled the Iron Age population of Poulton to pursue a mixed farming strategy which would have made life far more stable. When these variables are combined, the topographical location of Chapel Field may well provide the key to unlocking lowland Iron Age settlement in north-west England.

They in fact shared similarities with the Iron Age remains, with cattle, sheep, and pig dominating. Most of the cattle were slaughtered when mature and therefore had not been primarily raised for meat, though their bones showing signs of filleting rather than being brought or sold as joints. In contrast, pig were under-represented for a Roman site, with a lack of meat-bearing bones indicating that they may have been transported elsewhere. Red and roe deer, horse, dog, and cat were also represented to a far lesser extent. The results provided tentative evidence of cultural continuity from the Iron Age through the first millennium AD, but with the population adopting some Roman ways.

It should not be too surprising that the Iron Age community chose to adopt the Roman way of life rather than resisting the overwhelming strength of their military machine, especially with the legionary fortress being only five miles from Poulton. A close link to the fortress is further supported by the discovery of several roof tiles carrying the stamp of the XX Legion. The site also sits on the boundary of two tribal entities, the Cornovii who were allied to Rome, and the Deceangli of North Wales, who are recorded as quickly capitulating. It would appear that the population were allowed to continue their lives and would have further benefited from the

new opportunities presented to them; Chapel Field is less than a mile from Watling Street, and would therefore have had access to the many imported items being transported to Chester.

THE PERFECT SITE FOR A SETTLEMENT

Excavations in Chapel Field have revealed that a prosperous community lived here throughout the Iron Age and Romano-British Period. The fundamental question that therefore presents itself is why this location? The answers lie in the local resources and topography. Firstly, Chapel Field is located next to the River Dee and as such provides a constant source of fresh water. There would have been a ready supply of food and materials, from fish to small animals and larger game that would have given the inhabitants a good supply of meat and skins with which to make pelts, and the riverine vegetation could be used for basketry, construction, food, and medicine. The gentle easterly slope to the River Dee would have allowed easy access by boat, enabling trade into Wales and the Midlands, via the Dee Estuary and the coastal trade routes of the Irish Sea. Such a location would have provided ideal access to the regional, national, and even international trade networks that existed at this time.

One of the most important factors regarding settlement location, though,

Acknowledgements

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Further reading

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